

Running head: Improving Organizational Communications

Improving Organizational Communications  
Between Line and Staff Personnel in Fire Departments

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### Abstract

The research problem was that personnel within the Northampton Fire Department felt disconnected and disenfranchised with the Department due to a gap in communication between line and staff personnel. The purpose of this research was to investigate what barriers existed prohibiting effective communication between line and staff personnel within the Northampton Fire Department. The research questions that addressed this problem were: How do other organizations and industries, excluding Fire Departments, communicate with their employees? What are the internal organizational factors that affect communication between line and staff personnel within area Fire Departments? What are the internal organizational factors that affect communication between line and staff personnel within the Northampton Fire Department? The research methodology used was descriptive research. The procedures used included review at the National Fire Academy Learning Resource Center and local library, along with a survey that was sent to other Fire Departments. The results showed a number of variables affecting communication along with alternative solutions to minimize any potential barriers towards communications. Recommendations included purchase and implementation of new technology, investigation of alternative shift schedules, and scheduled face-to-face meetings between line and staff personnel on a regular basis.

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## Improving Organizational Communications Between Line and Staff Personnel in Fire Departments

The ever increasing advances in technology have vastly changed the way information flows between people across the world. In the 1840's, communications within the United States was accelerated by the introduction of the telegraph, in which messengers such as Andrew Carnegie would carry the message from the telegraph to the business offices. Soon after, a cable was placed under the Atlantic Ocean to connect London and Europe to this communication network (Temin, 2000). Now, web based information and communication has become more prevalent and has expedited transferring information between organizations and groups.

No group or Department can exist without effective communication. Communication within Fire Departments allows for sharing of information and ideas, identifying problems or areas needing improvement, and fully empowering personnel as stakeholders within their organizations in the decision making process. Research indicates that poor communication is the most frequently cited source of interpersonal conflict. Because individuals spend nearly seventy percent of their waking hours communicating, it is arguable to believe that one of the most inhibiting factors to successful group performance is a lack of effective communication (Robbins, 2001).

In 1997, the City of Northampton hired Municipal Resources Incorporated, from New Hampshire, to analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the services being provided by the Fire Department (Municipal Resources Incorporated, 1997). The completed report identified over eighty-eight areas that needed to be changed, corrected, or improved. Examples included replacement of out dated apparatus, increase in shift staffing, reorganization of Department organizational structure, and a broadening of the scope of services provided by the Department.

The completion of the study and the numerous amounts of recommendations made by this report foreshadowed the inevitable that there was going to be major changes coming to the organization. This created some anxiety and fear among the line personnel because of the uncertainty of the future and the unknown of what their role was and how much input they were going to have during this transitional period. Line personnel are personnel assigned to a Shift that provide the emergency services such as fire suppression, emergency medical services (EMS), and other operational demands. Staff personnel are personnel who provide support and administrative services to assist the line personnel in acquiring the necessary tools and resources to enable them to complete their assignments (Smoke, 2005).

The Fire Administration for the Northampton Fire Department and the City had their view of how and when these recommended changes should occur and other members within the Department had their own views of the changes needed and the prioritization of these as well. Communication among line and staff personnel would be key to successfully implementing many of the recommendations along with pacing the change within the organization at a rate which the personnel could absorb, in addition to allowing personnel input into the decision making process solidifying the true stake they have within the organization (Linsky, 2002).

Everyday, the interpersonal communications process, because of its critical nature in transmitting relevant and pertinent information pertaining to the organization and possibly the effects on personnel within that organization, must be managed and evaluated on a ongoing basis to ensure there is fluid dialogue and ongoing discussions among all personnel. For this among other reasons, interpersonal communications has been a focus of programs developed and delivered by the National Fire Academy (NFA) (Campbell, 2002). Any existing barriers

affecting effective communication between line and staff personnel within the fire service and the Northampton Fire Department, need to be identified in an effort to improve the overall cohesiveness, relations, and group performance of the organization.

The research problem is personnel within the Northampton Fire Department feel disconnected and disenfranchised with the Department due to a gap in communication between line and staff personnel.

The purpose of this research is to investigate what barriers exists prohibiting effective communication between line and staff personnel within the Northampton Fire Department.

The research questions that addressed this problem were: How do other organizations and industries, excluding Fire Departments, communicate with their employees? What are the internal organizational factors that affect communication between line and staff personnel within area Fire Departments? What are the internal organizational factors that affect communication between line and staff personnel within the Northampton Fire Department?

The research method used was descriptive research. Research was done into other for-profit and non-profit organizations communications methods and their effectiveness. Research was also completed at the local library and the National Fire Academies Learning Resource Center.

### Background and Significance

The Northampton Fire Department is comprised of 60 full-time firefighters and serves a community of approximately 30,000 people. It covers a land area of approximately 35 square miles and is located in the Connecticut River Valley in Western Massachusetts (Department of Housing and Community Development [DHCD], 2000). Located in the Five College Area of the

Pioneer Valley, the City of Northampton is home to Smith College. The City is lively, diverse, and has influences from many different cultures around the world. The City is served by the Northampton Airport, Interstate 91, and an active rail line operated by the Springfield Terminal, home to the Hampshire County Correctional Facility, and traversed by the Connecticut River. All of these elements, including the old timber and brick construction where many of the downtown buildings share common walls, high rise residential structures, commercial and manufacturing buildings, and a hospital located within the community, contribute to some unique, hazardous, and challenging conditions that could be encountered by fire personnel.

The personnel are divided up into four work groups and work twenty-four hour shifts responding out of two stations. Each group has fifteen firefighters assigned to it and the department minimum staffing for each group is eleven firefighters. This minimum staffing level allows for two engine companies with four personnel in each vehicle, an ambulance staffed with two personnel, and a Deputy Chief in a Command Vehicle, the ability to respond to a reported structure fire is all units are available. The Fire Department provides multiple services to the community and the people within including: fire suppression, primary emergency medical services (EMS) and transport, hazardous materials response, water, ice, and technical rescues, and various other emergency responses.

The Northampton Fire Department has six administrative staff positions which include the Fire Chief, Assistant Fire Chief, Deputy Chief in charge of the EMS Division, Training Captain, Captain in charge of Inspectional Programs, and an Administrative Assistant to the Fire Chief. Each of these staff positions have a regular work week Monday-Friday from 0800-1600. Line personnel, assigned to a Shift, work a rotating 24-hour work schedule consisting of one

twenty-four hour shift on, one twenty-four hour shift off, one twenty-four hour shift on and then five days off.

In calendar year 2007, the Northampton Fire Department responded to 4,996 calls for service. This averages out, over the course of the year, to just over thirteen calls for service per Shift during a twenty-four hour work day. In addition to responding to calls for service, personnel perform daily training evolutions, fire inspections, and educational programs to multiple organizations throughout the community. The average time personnel are committed to a call for service according to our data records kept for all fire incidents on the Department's data software program, Information Management Corporation (IMC), is less than forty-five minutes per call. This contributes for a large portion of the time on shift in which personnel must manage their time effectively and complete any other tasks assigned for the day. "In most fire departments, companies spend less than 10 percent of their time dealing with emergencies" (Smoke, 2005, p. 5). Time management and the ability to have effective interdepartmental communication during the other 90% of the work time continue to be the challenge.

One of the biggest changes based off of the recommendations from the consultant's report in 1997, was to transition the EMS provided in the City to a fire-based service. Since the early 1980's, a private contractor was designated as the primary provider for EMS within the City of Northampton. Working groups and committees were formed with participation and representation from all dimensions of the organization to help perpetuate this concept into reality. Throughout the development process of forming a fire-based EMS transport service, the Fire Administration of the Northampton Fire Department continually heard from the line personnel that there was not effective communication throughout the process and they felt like



they were being left out of the decision making. Although efforts were made to form committees to provide input, personnel felt as if the Fire Administration was not keeping them updated continually on the ongoing progress and changes.

Communication issues continued to be a concern in 2003 when the City of Northampton entered into contract negotiations with the Northampton Firefighters union, Local 108. Included in the bargaining package was a new scheduling rotation for all line personnel assigned to a Shift. Previously, personnel assigned to a Shift worked ten-hour days and fourteen-hour nights with four full days off before having to return to work. One of the proposals from the Local union during these contract deliberations was to transition away from the ten-hour day and fourteen-hour nights and apply a twenty-four hour shift assignment to all personnel assigned to each of the four working groups. This would lead to personnel assigned to Shift working one day on, one day off, one day on, and five full days off before returning to work. Discussion ensued from each side pertaining to the benefits and drawbacks of this particular proposal. In particular, was the City's and Fire Administrations concern over the amount of time line personnel would be away from their profession and the negative ramifications and impacts it could potentially have pertaining to training updates, Firefighter fatigue, and communication between all personnel within the Department.

Still today, line personnel feel they don't know what is happening with the day-to-day administrative decisions being made that effect the operations and services being provided to the community. Examples of these include budgetary changes or updates during these difficult financial times faced by the State of Massachusetts and the effects it is having on the local communities, updates on the status of any pending grant applications, and the status of

administering a new entry level exam and hiring of more personnel. Like many organizations, managerial silence seems to be growing at a time when fierce competition and operational demands are requiring organizations to rapidly change. These are times, in particular, when the workforce wants to hear from the top management (Abrashoff, 2002).

The probable future impact on the organization will continue to be detrimental and further distance the relations between line and staff personnel if communication barriers are not identified and alternatives for internal organizational communications cannot be evaluated and implemented. “In hundreds of surveys at different companies, employees cite poor communication as the greatest source of wasted time, effort and material as well as internal and external conflict” (Ladew, 1998, p. 101). Organizational mistrust, decreased employee morale, lack of production, and quality of service being provided could all be contributed to ongoing poor internal communications if not corrected or improved upon.

This research project is significant to the Northampton Fire Department in order to minimize or eliminate the animosity and dissention between the line and staff in the past has resulted from miscommunication or lack of communication between the two groups. This has led to personnel filing grievances against the Administration of the Department and low morale in part because line personnel felt that they weren’t made a part of the process from the onset. Decreased employee morale, sick calls, and reduced employee productivity can all be fueled by miscommunications (Murphy, 2005). Good communication skills are paramount for effectively leading and supervising others, and will also help to determine how well your staff works together as a team.

The research into this problem will relate to the United State's Fire Administration's (USFA) mission to respond appropriately in a timely manner to emerging issues (NFA, 2008). This research will also continue to examine one of the purposes and objectives of the Executive Leadership course, as stated in the Operational Policies and Procedures, which examines areas in storytelling and feedback, or otherwise communications (NFA, 2008).

This research contributed to the resolution of the problem by contributing valuable information on areas to help improve intradepartmental communications and identification of barriers that previously affected the communication link between line and staff personnel. By identifying alternative means of communication and determining what methods and resources are available to improve in this area, the goal is to eliminate any communication barriers between line and staff personnel. It must be stressed that this paper focused on communications off of the fireground. It looked at the day-to-day, non-emergency situations pertaining to communications. This will help to propel the organization forward and adapt more readily to the ever changing environment, while having the personnel feel a greater sense of belonging to the organization.

This research plans to build from the base of existing knowledge as presented in the Literature Review into a new knowledge base built from research that will be performed. At the end, the goal will be to find alternative methods, ideas, or alternative solutions to eliminate or at least minimize any barriers that exist between fire department line and staff personnel. This will allow the Department to better communicate ongoing changes and information to all personnel in a timely manner and provide for feedback from personnel pertinent to suggestions or ideas they may have to better serve the community and improve the organization.

## Literature Review

A review of relative literature to the research problem found that there are a number of variables effecting communication that can lead to either lack of communication, ineffective communication, or misrepresentation of the message trying to be sent and creating barriers in the communications process. Communication skills are the foundation for success. The ability to communicate effectively and with influence will determine the success in transmitting the message (Palazzolo, 2008).

Communication is the exchange and flow of information and ideas from one person to another. It involves a sender transmitting an idea to a receiver. Effective communication occurs only if the receiver understands the exact information or idea that the sender intended to transmit. Many of the problems that occur in an organization are the direct result of people failing to communicate. Leaders of organizations who keep everything inside or cannot communicate a message leave individuals to their devices to try and figure out what they may, or may not, want. This is a failure of leadership and communication (Baldoni, 2003). Faulty communication causes the most problems. It leads to confusion and can cause a good plan to fail.

A typical communications model has five elements: a sender, a message, a medium, a receiver, and a feedback process. The sender has information that they are wishing to deliver and share through a method of communication. The message is the information being communicated. The medium is the method the sender chooses to transmit or share the information. The receiver is the recipient of the message and the feedback process allows the sender to know that the message was received and understood (Smoke, 2005). If one of these components of the communication model is not present, then the communications process or message trying to be conveyed could become misunderstood, or communicated in a manner that

the sender did not intend. Many of the breakdowns in communications throughout organizations has had one of these components missing that has led to the miscommunication, lack of communication, or some barrier affecting the communication. Many times, different barriers negatively affect the communications process and impede the message trying to be sent. Some of these barriers include the use of an inappropriate medium, incorrect grammar, words that conflict with body language, or lack of feedback pertaining to the message being sent (Sanchez, 2008).

Non-verbal communication in the messages being sent, greatly influence how messages are received through the course of the communications process. People inherently have different ways of expression or body language to assist in the transmission of a message. “Effective communication is a total package. It must be a perfect combination of body language, positive vocal inflection and eloquent, meaningful words delivered with a sincere smile” (Wilson, 2008, p. 33). These visible cues, such as hand gestures, facial expressions, and looking directly at the sender of the message when it is begin conveyed provide immediate feedback for the sender to process.

Non-verbal communication, or our body language, can often communicate one’s thoughts or feelings more honestly than verbal communications. Our eyes, hands, and bodies send and receive communication signals constantly. Many people may cross their arms and legs and orient their bodies in specific withdrawal postures to shut out those who are perceived as threatening, and many people use the power of touch to emphasize or bring more emotion to a subject matter during conversation. The world’s best business communicators have strong body language reflecting a commanding presence, confidence, and competence. This, in part, is due to the fact that only 7% of communication actually involves words. Fifty-five percent of

communication involves some type of body language, and thirty-eight percent of communication involves vocal cues such as pitch, speed, volume, reflection, and tone of your voice (Gallo, 2007).

Messages and communications can be sent formally or informally. Formal communications are typically vertical, follow the authority chain, and are limited to task related communications. Examples of formal communications are Department letters, memos, or fact-to-face communications. Informal communications moves about in many directions within the organization and is likely to satisfy group members' social needs as it is to facilitate task accomplishments. Examples of informal communications include the "grapevine", otherwise known as Department gossip, email, and instant messaging (Benton, et al, 2002). Both types of communication serve a purpose for each organization. However, no matter what type of process is used to communicate a message, their needs to be as little distortion as possible to receive the message as intended.

Email has become a popular medium for communicating messages throughout organizations. This form of communication is readily available to most individuals whether at work, home, or mobile via increased technological advances with hand held devices. Email is inexpensive, fast, and easy for most users. The use of email allows for immediate exchange of information and written documentation for reference at a later date if needed. In 2003, META Group, Inc. of Stamford, CT conducted an online survey regarding the use of e-mail versus phone for business communication among 387 organizations, representing a wide range of company sizes and industries worldwide. The results revealed business people preferred the use of email as a form of inter-organizational communication than the telephone (Alexandrou, 2003).

Opponents of email as a form of communications within organizations worry that a heavy reliance on communication via email in the workplace will lead to an abundance of messages in individual's inboxes and possibly the deletion of the message. "Most of us are inundated with too much email. Leaders need to limit their use of it when sending leadership messages; otherwise it will not be read" (Baldoni, 2003, p. 68). In addition, as soon as email writers start using text phrases to characterize emotion that would normally be delivered via physical body language, the intended message could be misunderstood by the reader due to a complete misinterpretation of the writer's emotional tone. Emotional and ill-considered messages are sent before the sender has reflected on the message being sent which could potentially lead to ill feelings and negative consequences. In addition, the email could be sent to the wrong recipients creating privacy or personnel issues (Hahn, 2007).

Communication is an active process on all parties involved that requires the person receiving the message to actually listen to that which is being said. It is not enough to just hear the message, but to understand, remember, and provide some sort of feedback to the message. "What counts is the substance of the communication and the nature of the person doing the communicating-including his or her ability to listen as well as to talk" (Bossidy & Charan, 2002, p. 29). Being a good communicator means being a good listener; a leader or manager who understands his or her subordinates along with their feelings, hopes, fears, and ideas.

Understanding what is being communicated from the sender's point of view provides differing perspectives. Empathy, or the ability to understand feelings, thought, or experiences from the sender's point of view, helps to better understand people. "Empathic listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look through it, you see the world the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel" (Covey, 2004, p.

240). Increased time demands placed upon many management positions has created a sense of urgency to get things done and little time left to stop, communicate, reflect, and listen. Care needs to be given that personnel aren't so busy talking that they don't hear and listen to something that is important.

Many times messages are not received as intended because they are presented in a method that cannot be easily understood. The audience for which the message was intended was not considered prior to being delivered. This, in turn, creates confusion from the onset, and individuals begin to tune out the message in preparing to try and answer the other person. In addition, typically people tune out fifty percent of what is being said because they've already have started to think of a reply. Once this process occurs, the communication process has been interrupted and the flow has been negatively impacted throughout (Koval & Thaler, 2003).

As more communication up and down the line at work is done electronically, face-to-face discussion can easily fall by the wayside. While the speed and volume of communication increases with e-mail, voicemail and instant messaging, some of the dialogue and personal touch can start to disappear. Today's fast paced society has individual's more than ever communicating through cell phones, Blackberries, I-phones, and email, and other electronic devices due to time constraints and convenience. Communication through these types of mediums fosters limited, if any, expression, reflection, gestures, and other styles to fully communicate a message. Face-to-face communications can bring a group together and provide a richness of experience that virtual communication such as teleconferencing or videoconferencing can't match (Metcalf, 2007). Face-to-Face communication is still regarded as the best way to communicate a message and get the full meaning and intent across to the receiver. Gestures and movements such as eye contact, arms folded, or shifting from side-to-side are all examples of



body language displaying more detailed information to the other person. It's not always easy to find time for personal discussion with so much to do at work. However, in the long term, face-to-face communication just might assure that communication is clear and understood.

This literature review had a significant impact in supporting and influencing the purpose of this research paper. The review clearly showed and documented the number of variables that could affect communications between line and staff personnel in fire departments. "Achieving effective communication is not always easy, but the results are worth it: increased effectiveness and efficiency, higher morale, an honest exchange of thoughts and opinions, and a more harmonious work environment" (McWilliams, 2005, p. 98). Improved communications will help to foster a closer employer and employee working environment and develop an atmosphere in the organization to encourage discussion and the exchange and sharing of information to improve the Department.

### Procedures

The initial development and formulation of ideas for this research paper began in the Executive Leadership Program at the National Fire Academy from April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008 through May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008. Ideas were formulated about the different issues affecting the Northampton Fire Department and the correlation between the objectives of the program, and the relevance to the USFA's five operational objectives. As identified in the Background and Significance section of this paper, recent events in the fire service and the Northampton Fire Department in regards to barriers affecting effective communication were found to be an occurrence negatively affecting Department morale, organizational improvement, and line personnel not knowing what is happening with the day-to-day administrative decisions being made that effect the operations and services being provided to the community. In addition, a lot of animosity and dissention

between the line and staff was the result of miscommunication or lack of communication between the two groups. It must be stressed that this paper focused on communications off of the fireground. It looked at the day-to-day, non-emergency situations pertaining to communications.

The research began by investigating the problem and analyzing information at the Learning Resource Center at the National Fire Academy. The computerized card catalog was used to search for material to be utilized in the Literature Review section of this paper. Key words such as “personal communications” “miscommunications”, and “improving Department communications” were used to do an initial search for information for any relevant EFO papers from past participants in a subject matter of similar content. This author did not find any EFO papers when this search criterion was entered. This intrigued the author even more due to the initial lack of fire service subject matter.

This research proposal was submitted to an evaluator within two weeks from returning home from the National Fire Academy and modifications and changes were sent back from the evaluator to help reflect more accurate content about this problem. All of the comments were reviewed by the author and the appropriate changes were made reflecting the evaluators feedback and a descriptive method of research was continued to investigate the proposed problem and purpose statement of this paper.

A survey was developed to send to area fire departments in Western Massachusetts reflecting the problem statement and purpose of the research for this paper. The survey was developed using the website [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) to help format, structure, and send to Departments and provide feedback electronically in a timely manner. The survey was sent via email to the one-hundred and one communities in Western Massachusetts. The goal of the

survey was to find alternative methods and styles of communicating between line and staff personnel. In addition, the questions in the survey was designed and formatted to analyze if a recurring variable or theme existed in acting as a barrier affecting communication within other Departments. Identification of any obstacles would allow Departments to minimize these situations from occurring, thus potentially improving communications throughout their organization. This sample of Departments was chosen in Massachusetts because the author is a member of the Western Massachusetts Fire Chiefs Association and has a good working relationship with this body. This sample also provided for a mix of different types of fire departments in the area of career, combination, and volunteer. The topic of this research paper is not solely dependent and reflective only on career Departments and the survey questions were designed with identifying problems or solutions to the purpose of this research paper.

Prior to the survey being sent, Fire Chief Brian Duggan, of the Northampton Fire Department and EFO Graduate, was forwarded the questions to validate the survey and offer any changes to improve the research. Seventy responses were submitted electronically from the area Departments and were used to answer question number two in the Results section.

Additional research was conducted at the library at the Northampton Fire Department Headquarters and also using the computer in the office at the author's residence. Other organizations, excluding fire departments, were examined as to their communication styles and issues pertaining to communications between personnel within the organizations. This research was used to help answer question number one in the Results section.

A rough draft of this paper was completed on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008 and was given to Fire Chief Brian Duggan of the Northampton Fire Department for review and critique (Personal Communication). The draft was then reviewed, revised, and submitted for evaluation.

## Results

How do other industries and organizations, excluding Fire Departments, communicate with their employees? Communication lies at the heart of any business and in fact plays an integral part of any business (Brown, 2008). Many different businesses choose different styles or mediums to communicate their messages with their employees. Depending on the size and scope of the organization and the number of employees that need to provide feedback in a given time frame will affect the method in which the message is delivered. Some of the most common methods business organizations and industries communicate with their employees are email, face-to-face communications, teleconferencing, and video conferencing.

Personal visits were replaced by phone calls, phone calls were replaced by e-mail. Communication is still ongoing in different organizations; it is just being done in different mediums. Email communication is the most widely used form of communication in business organizations (Arora, 2004). Email allows personnel to send a message to a large group of people in a relatively short period of time. “E-mail can communicate the same message to many employees at once, can help reiterate a message delivered face-to-face or over the telephone, and can serve as a record of past communication” (McWilliams, 2005, p. 96). Email is easily accessible and simple to use helping to meet many time demands placed on executives in many business organizations.

This rapidly growing form of communication is often misused. Although sending an email rather than personally meeting with someone is more efficient, it tends to be less personal and can hinder social interaction and relationship building. This form of written communication can often be misunderstood due to the lack of care, proofreading, editing, and speed at which it is sent (O’Dea, 2008).

Instant messaging is a form of email that is also becoming more prevalent in business for interpersonal communications. Business Executives are now looking at instant messaging tools for improving communication process in an effort to help build close knit teams and improve employee relationships. It is an established medium of improving employee productivity (Arora, 2004). Instant messaging continues to be the communications method of choice for many because it is instantaneous and more personal than e-mail, while being a bit less intrusive than the telephone. Instant messaging is good for dual communications. For example, you can get information from a colleague via an instant message while you're on the phone with a customer, without having to disrupt the telephone conversation. Instant messaging can also be useful for quick communications in emergencies, as the Internet may remain functional during an outage of regular telephone services.

However, this form of communication is not always beneficial to the organization. One study found that the three leading uses of instant messaging were not for customer or partner facing communications. The top three uses of instant messaging in the enterprise noted by respondents were; casual intra-company communication, personal use, and presence awareness (Kerner, 2004). This leads many in the business industry to believe that instant messaging may not be able to override e-mail as the most formal and preferred communication tool, but its relative advantages of spontaneity and interactivity will enable it to play a complimentary role to e-mail communication.

A recent survey revealed that face-to-face communications is the most common form for employee communication used by small and medium-sized businesses. Eighty-seven percent of survey respondents used face-to-face conversations; 81 percent had an open-door policy; and 79 percent held management meetings to communicate with employees (International Association

of Business Communicators, 2008). Face-to-face communications allows all parties involved to visually interpret different body movements and cues that might help understand the intent of the message better. After all, researchers have discovered that seven percent of the information we receive is from what people say and over fifty-five percent of the information we receive is from body language (Fiero, 2008).

Teleconferencing is a form of communication that allows two or more people to talk live via a telephone. A teleconference allows people who are thousands of miles apart to communicate. They can allow you to participate in a work conference call from home or to hold your own conference call with many people without everyone being in one location (Mencinger, 2007). This form of communication is unique and innovative in that it revolutionizes everyday tasks such as management, business operation, training and communication among geographically dispersed teams while also increasing productivity, reducing travel time and cost, and offers a personal mode of communication (Tehrani, 2007). However, although this method of communication expedites the process, it still lacks the interpersonal form of communication received when done face-to-face.

Another form of communication that many businesses are utilizing in their organizations is video conferencing. Video conferencing is a form of communication that uses interactive technologies and simultaneous audio and video communication. This technology allows personnel in two or more locations to communicate anywhere. Video conferencing allows the individuals communicating to visually see and hear at the same time which provides a more personable experience improving the quality of communication with greater results (Long, 2008).

Video conferencing is taking on an important significance in business organizations today not only to improve communications among employer, employees, and their customers, but also to save on costs and reduce operating expenses while still improving and enhancing quality products and productivity. Video conferencing allows businesses to set up meeting fasters resulting in faster decision making, and share presentations, applications, and communicate in a manner that is as close to face-to-face as possible given the potential distances between organizations today (Kirbey, 2008).

Videoconferencing increases communication between groups that are geographically distant. This technology allows communication to talk place as if individuals are in the same room allowing for greater participation and discussion between groups. Having a face to go with a voice are all possible with video conferencing and nobody has to leave their offices. When parties from around the globe meet through web video conferencing, it makes the interaction more personal. Many times videoconferencing eliminates having to brief staff at a later date that was unable to attend the initial meeting. This feature of video conferencing can help save a lot of time in today's fast paced environments (Lane, 2008). The flexibility and versatility of videoconferencing allows communication to be more effective without even leaving the company or office. In addition, employees do not need to take time away from their schedules to travel back and forth or potentially miss a meeting.

The world of communications is rapidly changing each day. Not only is video conferencing having an effect on business communications, it is also changing the way other organizations such as the military, schools, and hospitals communicate. The military is using this type of technology to improve communications with Washington D.C and battlefield commanders in other areas of the world. Schools and educators can deliver quality programs

with guest speakers to multiple locations and events to meet the growing need of students. Finally, telesurgery is beginning to be performed on people in hospitals where technical experts are immediately available. Telesurgery is done in conjunction with robotics where doctors perform surgery being controlled remotely allowing communication and treatment with patients all over the world (Byrd, 2008).

What are the internal organizational factors that affect communication between line and staff personnel within area Fire Departments? A survey (Appendix A) was generated and sent to area Fire Departments in Western Massachusetts to find out what variables potentially influenced communications between line and staff personnel within their organizations. The results can be found in Appendix B of this paper.

The survey was sent to an array of Departments reflecting a cross-sectional representation of a variety of organizations. Although the majority of respondents reflect volunteer and combination Departments that typically have less than fifty personnel within the organization, the issue of miscommunications is unchanged. The majority of respondents stated their Departments use email or regularly scheduled meetings as a means to communicate new information to personnel.

Interestingly, the survey results revealed that the majority of Departments have line personnel that are away from the Department, off-duty, at least four days over the course of a typical eight-day work cycle. In the case of the Departments that have Call Firefighters or Volunteer Firefighters, time away from the Department is dependent on call volume and frequency. These types of schedules with personnel being absent or away from work for extended periods of time increase the difficulty of transmitting information in a timely in efficient manner effectively to everyone. It was mentioned numerous times in the comment



section of the survey that the 24-hour rotation is inherently problematic because of the 5 days off which means opposite shifts never relieve each other and the amount of time personnel are away from work.

The survey also showed that once personnel are at work, Departments, at times, have a difficult time getting everyone together to have an informational Group or Shift meeting without being interrupted by a service or emergency call. This creates a fractured Group dynamic and leaves individuals being called away from the meeting to get the information at a later date or time which could lead to inconsistencies in the transmitting of the message.

In addition, almost seventy-five percent of the respondents stated that their Department has no group or committee, such as a Joint Labor/Management or Association/Management Committee to voice concerns, issues, or ideas for discussion or implementation. This type of body within a Department could be extremely valuable in an effort to create a constant forum for these types of discussions and the generation of conversations and the creation of avenues for the flow of information. This type of committee or body would be able to channel or funnel information and keep it directional to help better the Department instead of just letting it fester amongst the personnel.

Twenty percent of the respondents have the Fire Chief's Office located at another building besides Fire Headquarters. Over eighty-eight percent of the respondents have one or two stations allowing for a greater interaction between line and staff personnel on a regular basis when working. Having Staff personnel go out to multiple stations can be time consuming and lead to different presentations and answers to questions that other personnel were not able to participate. If employees perceive that they are not receiving consistent communications, the credibility of the leaders may start to weaken. This will not only influence the relationship

between the leaders and the employees, it has the potential to negatively influence future communications.

Finally, the results of the survey showed that personnel are genuinely interesting in hearing from the Administration. Individuals want to be kept updated and informed of impending changes upcoming or just the general knowledge of organizational operations. This is a key component and an important factor in the communication process because personnel not caring about communicating or the happenings of the organization could create a serious road block or barrier in organizational communications.

These survey results all contributed to the purpose of this research paper by identifying communication barriers in other Departments and formulating new and innovative thoughts and ideas that can be implemented into operational and administrative practice in an effort to improve communications between line and staff personnel at the Northampton Fire Department. These new and innovative methods will help to foster a greater sense of continuity among all personnel and allow personnel to have a greater sense of belonging and stake in the organization.

The survey asked detailed questions to comprehensively cover all aspects affecting communications within Fire Departments and gain a better perspective and understanding of different methodologies utilized around the region. Potential limitations and variables were identified as contributing factors negatively impacting and creating barriers for communications which can be used to help the communications process in the Northampton Fire Department. Such barriers and limitations included, shift schedule and the amount of time line personnel are away from work, interruptions at scheduled meetings, and time constraints all impact this process.

What are the internal organizational factors that affect communication between line and staff personnel within the Northampton Fire Department? The line personnel within the Northampton Fire Department are assigned to four working shifts identified as Group A, B, C, and D working 24-hours per shift from 0800 through 0800. The twenty-four hour schedule personnel work is 1-1-1-5 (one day on, one day off, one day on, five days off). Although, due to the schedule, line personnel could work forty-eight hours some weeks, the average work week for each Firefighter over the course of an eight week pay period is forty-two hours.

This schedule worked by the Northampton Fire Department line personnel, contributes to a number of communication problems within the Department. The first contributing factor negatively impacting communications within the Department is this type of twenty-four hour shift in our Department does not allow each group, along with its assigned personnel, the opportunity to see personnel from each group at least once over the course of the week.

Additionally, Shift personnel are away from the Department five days every work week. This leaves a lot to happen and catch up on over the course of the five days that they were away. Additionally, this time frame increases with use of personal time for vacation or other personal reasons. The City initially pushed to implement 24-hour shifts utilizing a 1-3-1-3 (one day on, three days off, one day on, three days off) over the course of a eight day work week to help minimize the time personnel would be away from the Department. This type of schedule would have still maintained an average of a forty-two hour work week. The concern from the City was the time away negatively affecting communications and also the concern that personnel would treat their job as a part-time job and not their primary occupation.

The computer software program used for fire incident reporting is Information Management Corporation (IMC). The program has a Department email system capable to be used for intra-department communications. This requires each user to individually logon to the computer network to send or retrieve information. One feature of the software program is once you logon to the system, it will immediately identify to the user if there is a new message for them. However, having no Department policy mandating the use of this system, many line personnel are never required or have any job responsibility or function requiring the use of this software system. Typically, the only users of the system are the Officer's within the Department completing the call for service and emergency reporting or the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) personnel completing their run reports. Therefore, many messages communicated via Department email do not reach many line personnel or the messages do not get received in a timely fashion.

Many line personnel, due to lack of training and use, do not even know how to log onto the computer and retrieve any email messages sent. This then creates an immediate breakdown in communication and those personnel rely on other shift members or their Officers to relay information to them second hand, if at all. Access to computers at both Department stations is plentiful, with each location having a number of terminals accessible by all shift personnel.

The Fire Department Administration does not regularly meet with the Shift personnel to communicate ongoing administrative or operational issues. However, they do meet bi-weekly with the Shift Deputies to inform them of this information with the expectation that it will be disseminated through each of the Shifts. Many times, not all of the Shift Deputies are at these meetings due to personal scheduling conflicts. In addition, the Deputy Chief on-duty during this

time gets called away for any emergency or administrative need, such as a citizen walk-in or phone call, and misses most of the information and creates a cascading effect of miscommunication.

### Discussion

The comparison of the literature review and study results clearly demonstrates the number of variables that could be potential barriers negatively impacting communications within any organization. A breakdown in any one of the five components of the communications model (Smoke, 2005) could lead to a breakdown in the communications process and the message not being properly conveyed. Although difficult, achieving affective communications can lead an organization to becoming more productive, efficient, higher morale, and a more harmonious working environment (McWilliams, 2005).

Technological advances have changed the way people communicate in the workplace. Communication via email is growing in popularity due to it being readily accessible, easy, and fast thus becoming one of the preferred methods of communicating in the workplace (Arora, 2004). Most individuals have access to the internet for email communications whether they are stationary at work or mobile. However, as O'Dea (2008) mentions, this form of communication can be easily misused. Sending emotionally charged messages reflecting your feelings at that given time prior to reflecting on more focused statements, sending correspondence prior to proofreading, and misinterpretation from the receiver due to clarity in the message sent can all be pitfalls and perils of email.

Consideration needs to be given to personnel, such as at the Northampton Fire Department, whom does not know how to access their email on the computers. In addition, over

seventy-five percent of the respondents to the survey (appendix B) stated that email is used as a form of communication within their Departments. One concern, as Hahn (2007) mentions for the use of email as a primary means for communication, is the sending of information to the wrong individuals in which could lead to personnel issues or privacy concerns.

Visible cues help to express and communicate messages that can be understood at a much higher success than just hearing a message. Visible cues allows for the sender and receiver of messages to get immediate feedback and better interpretation of the message. A combination of body language and message content helps to achieve effective communications (Wilson, 2008). Providing some type of face-to-face communications, although time consuming, can be the most beneficial. More than half of the information people receive is from body language (Fiero, 2008) allowing for a better understanding of the message. Many Departments stated that they have some type of committee or body to hold these face-to-face discussions with the Administration of the Department (appendix B, question 6) which creates a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas. These meetings help to provide for immediate feedback and transmission of messages immediately to the body.

Comments received from area Departments in regards to barriers affecting communication within their Departments (appendix B, question 15) was the work schedules for each of their Departments and the number of days each employee is away from work. About eight percent of the respondents noted that personnel within their Departments were away from work at least three days or more per week (appendix B). These types of schedules could potentially lead to little time for face-to-face communications which would then force the sender of information to resort to another form of communication such as email. Unfortunately, as

people become more and more inundated with email they tend to delete messages and not fully receive the message (Baldoni, 2003).

Although technological advances in communications such as video conferencing has created more options for organizations to transmit messages, the full benefit and experience of communicating face-to-face is lost during the utilization of these other mediums (Metcalf, 2007). However, video conferencing allows organizations an alternative to help meet the demands place upon them during time sensitive decision making circumstances. Video conferencing helps brings separate groups together from remote locations to help make faster decisions, share ideas, and communicate in a manner that is as close to face-to-face as possible (Kirbey, 2008).

The interpretation and evaluation done by this author of the study results identified a number of barriers affecting the communication process throughout organizations. Also identified were alternative methods of communications, potential pitfalls, and barriers negatively impacting communications which now can be identified throughout organizations before it is too late. Communications are essential to the success of any Department or organization. Both benefit when accurate information is available and communicated to employees. Employees appreciate receiving timely, accurate, and relevant information. A goal of administrators is to become successful communicating to employees. When this is achieved, it helps to create a positive workplace, can alleviate miscommunications, and can motivate personnel to improve performance and the services being provided.

The implications of the results for the Northampton Fire Department are to investigate technological advances, such as video conferencing, and the costs associated with training and

installation in the current infrastructure. These technological advances would allow group discussion from remote stations and locations for all parties in an effort to provide a consistent and timely message. In addition, the importance of face-to-face communications needs to be emphasized and Administrative personnel need to investigate scheduling regular meets with each group to provide this type of forum. Although time demands can be precious, it could potentially be a good investment leading to less problems, grievances, and miscommunications in the future.

### Recommendations

Based upon the results, the Northampton Fire Department needs to examine alternative means and methods for communicating messages and information to all personnel within the Department in an effort to minimize any potential communications barriers. This can be accomplished through the following recommendations:

1. Purchase the technological capabilities to interconnect all Fire Stations via video conferencing. This will allow for daily or weekly shift briefings from the Administration and it will provide a forum for a consistent message delivered to all members in a timely fashion.
2. The City, Fire Administration, and Local Union need to collaboratively investigate alternative shift schedules relative to twenty-four hours that could have a positive impact on Department communications and still provide Department personnel benefits in which they desire and deserve.
3. The Fire Administration needs to schedule regular shift meetings with each group to provide for face-to-face dialogue and interact with personnel on a more personal level then sending an electronic message or phone call.



General recommendations for “future readers” who may wish to replicate some or all of this study within their own organization is to perform an internal study of the flow of information within your organization. An example of this could be to develop “pseudo” or fake department policy and distributed to the Shift Deputy. The goal of the study would be to have each member of the four shifts sign stated they have read the policy or in this case, they have received the information. Once it has gone through each shift, it would be returned. Verification could be done by referencing Department attendance records over the course of those days. This would help to identify if communication variables such as station locations, emergency call volume, or shift schedules plagues or hampers communication efforts within that Department.

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Appendix B

1. What methods of communication are used within your Department to inform personnel of new information?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
email		75.7%	53
<b>scheduled meetings</b>		<b>78.6%</b>	55
unscheduled/special meetings		30.0%	21
Department newsletter		5.7%	4
individually-face-to-face		58.6%	41
group/shift meetings		24.3%	17
other		15.7%	11

2. Does your Department have a web site that is updated on a regular basis (at least once a month)?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
yes		32.4%	22
no		67.6%	46

3. What is the typical Shift schedule of the line personnel?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Rotation- 10 hour days/ 14 hour nights		15.7%	11
Rotation- 24 hour days		14.3%	10
Scheduled days only		11.4%	8
Scheduled nights only		4.3%	3
No scheduled- on call or volunteer		62.9%	44

4. Typically, how many days are line personnel away from the Department over the course of eight days?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
1 day		9.4%	5
2 days		11.3%	6
3 days		11.3%	6
4 days		32.1%	17
5 days		13.2%	7
more than five days		35.8%	19

5. How often does the Fire Chief/Administrator set time aside to meet with line personnel in order to communicate and exchange information and ideas?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
As needed		57.1%	40
Every week		12.9%	9
Every other week		10.0%	7
once a month		24.3%	17
quarterly		2.9%	2
yearly		0.0%	0
never		8.6%	6

6. Does your Department have a Joint Labor/Management or Association/Management Committee to bring any issues or ideas forward together for investigation or implementation?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
yes		25.8%	17
no		74.2%	49



7. Does your Department find it difficult to get everyone together and have a Shift or group meeting without being interrupted by an emergency call?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
yes		30.4%	21
no		69.6%	48

8. What is the yearly call volume of your Department?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
less than 100 calls		14.3%	10
Between 101-500		40.0%	28
Between 501-1000		17.1%	12
Between 1001-2500		11.4%	8
Between 2501-5000		10.0%	7
Greater than 5000		7.1%	5

**8. What is the yearly call volume of your Department?**

**9. How many stations does your Department have?**

		Response Percent	Response Count
1		68.6%	48
2		20.0%	14
3		5.7%	4
4		4.3%	3
5		1.4%	1
more than five		0.0%	0


10. Where is your Fire Chief's office located?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
At Headquarters		80.0%	56
At one of the Department stations		10.0%	7
At City Hall/Town Offices		2.9%	2
At another City building or location		7.1%	5

11. Do line personnel want to hear from the Fire Department Administration and current or upcoming changes?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
yes		84.3%	59
no		0.0%	0
sometimes		15.7%	11

12. How many members are on your Department?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
0-25		27.1%	19
<b>26-50</b>		<b>57.1%</b>	40
51-75		8.6%	6
76-100		4.3%	3
more than 100		2.9%	2

13. What type of Department do you represent?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
All Volunteer		37.7%	26
Combination (any mix of volunteer, call, or career)		36.2%	25
All Call		13.0%	9
All Career		13.0%	9

14. What is your rank within the Department?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Chief		54.4%	37
Assistant Chief		4.4%	3
Deputy Chief		7.4%	5
District Chief		0.0%	0
Battalion Chief		0.0%	0
Captain		11.8%	8
Lieutenant		2.9%	2
Firefighter		19.1%	13

15. Do any barriers exist within your Department that inhibit effective communication between line and staff personnel?		
		Response Count
	 view	41
1.	We do not have any staff personnel so the passing down of information and the ability for rumors to spread quickly hampers our communications. Having more staff would combat this in my opinion.	
2.	getting 100% attendance at staff mtgs members on various leave (vac, etc) makes communication and training a challenge	
3.	No	
4.	No, we have a great line of communication, between Chief officers, Capt's & Lt's & other FF	
5.	no	
6.	resistance to e-mail, apathy among employees, inconsistent messages being sent as information filters through the command structure, pro union attitude, lack of administrative capacity, organizational culture that fosters an attitude that the union is more important than the organization, employees that place personal gain above helping others.	
7.	No, the department strongly encourages the first line officers to initiate informal discussions between firefighters and the first line officers. The department has an attitude of "total ownership" meaning each member has an equal voice and interest in seeing the department continuously build public confidence and respect. We hold 2 or 3 social functions Bus trip to a game, picnic and holiday gathering to foster open communications.	
8.	Having only one full time Captain can make it difficult. Because our Chief is on-call and must work full time out of town, it can sometimes take awhile to communicate needs of the department between the full time Captain and the Chief. The Chief meets with his full time Captain on Saturdays and Sundays to go over issues and any problems. Communication during the week is possible by cell phone but not as effective in getting things accomplished. Call force members approach full time Captain with department issues and concerns and these are then brought to the Chief for action.	
9.	No, I dont think so	
10.	The 24 hour rotation is inherently problematic because of the 5 day off which means opposite shifts never relieve each other.	
11.	It depends on the Chief. I've been through a few. Some do not want input and others do. Of those that do, some are not interested in some things.	
12.	Typical friction between career and call members	
13.	work schedule and bad attitudes!	
14.	No	
15.	No.	

**15. Do any barriers exist within your Department that inhibit effective communication between line and staff personnel?**

16. Biggest barrier is the current shift, where a group may be off for five days.
17. The rotation of shift makes immediate communication sometimes difficult.
18. Because of our dysfunctional layout – apparatus bays, career office, and chief office in three different locations mis-information moves faster than accurate information. This also creates pods of information sometimes a crew will develop some great ideas and present them , or members take advantage of this to be non productive or create issues. The newsletter worked good but hard to get input from members to keep it going. We are in the process of developing our web site to a members only section. Chris I would love to see your results if available in the future Russ
19. Failure of line personnel to read their email's.
20. The us vs. them mentality prevents good communication. The Chief percieves the ment don't care, (And many don't) and the Men percieve the Chief thinks he does not know what he is doing and is out to get them. (I work the day shift and see both sides, if they communicated more the whole department would see some positive change).
21. The usual personality conflicts.
22. No
23. Sometimes other officers are not opened minded to other ideas, and these officers, at times, are vocal about their disagreement in department meetings.
24. No
25. Not so much as a barrier but there could be a better way to get everyone the information that may be of more use in a more timely fashion. Than again being an all volunteer department makes getting members of the department very difficult.
26. Irregularity of attendance and statistically intermittent/irregular call frequency results in long periods between personnel being together or sometimes repeated events bunching up so that personnel are feeling overwhelmed by calls/meetings/training/fundraising events.
27. no
28. Not everyone has e-mail
29. At times the administration is not good at passing the info along. We used to have staff meeting once a month but now we seem not to have any.
30. No
31. No
32. Primarily it is mutual availability. No one date is good for all of the volunteers and just when everyone agrees on one specific date something will come along for someone so we usually end up having multiple sessions to meet with everyone. The problem with this approach is keeping the message consistent and on theme.
33. younger members are afraid to voice their options
34. Being a combination department it is often difficult to contact each member to bring forward any new changes. This is often done at a scheduled or



**15. Do any barriers exist within your Department that inhibit effective communication between line and staff personnel?**

unscheduled meeting. Email is often used to inform the rank and file of any changes to the training schedules or any other any other announcements that may be of interest to the personnel. I like to have meetings with the department members when changes are about to take place so that everyone gets the information at the same time and in the same format. This allows for questions to be answered and for everyone to get the information the same.

**35.** Informal barriers based upon personality.

**36.** No

**37.** Not everyone has email; so some information is communicated more slowly.

**38.** None

**39.** time is the biggest factor Very hard to get everyone here at the same time for meetings. usually have to have the same conversation multiple times.

**40.** No

**41.** None